A VOICE IN THE DARK
I Samuel 3: 1 - 10
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There is something compelling about a voice in the dark. There is something compelling and fascinating and slightly disturbing about the thought of a voice in the dark. George Bernard Shaw was intrigued with the idea and wrote a wry and provocative play, "Saint Joan", based on the life of Joan of Arc. Midway through the drama, at the height of her popularity Joan says,

> "...the world is too wicked for me. Only for my voices I should lose all heart. I'll tell you something, Jack. It is in the bells I hear my voices here in this corner, when the bells come down from heaven, and the echoes linger, or in the fields, when they come from a distance through the quiet of the countryside, my voices are in them"...The church bell rings..."Hark! Do you hear? 'Dear-child-of-God'...at the half hour they will say, 'I-am-thy-help!'"

> The official she is talking with interrupts..."Then, Joan, we shall hear whatever we fancy in the booming of the bell. You make me uneasy when you talk about your voices: I should think you were a bit cracked if I hadn't noticed that you give me very sensible reasons for what you do."

> Joan answers: "Well, I have to find reasons for you, because you do not believe in my voices. But the voices come first; and I find the reasons after:...." (St. Joan, Scene V, G. B. Shaw)

Joan of Arc, of course, was burned at the stake ultimately for insisting that she heard voices.

At the thought of mystical voices, visions, dreams, we do become uneasy. Yet, the history of human genius is full of people who heard and saw what others could not hear or see. Socrates, Martin Luther, William Blake, Saint Francis of Assissi, as well as Joan of Arc. Genius has often been propelled by a vision which was compellingly real.

Old G. B. Shaw anticipated our skepticism, or perhaps he was expressing his own, and he dealt with it wonderfully. In the first act Joan is being questioned by a military official:

> She says: "I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God."
> He says: "They come from your imagination."
> She says: "Of course. That is how messages from God come to us."
> (Ibid., Scene I, p. 65)

We can't argue with that. We do know that there is nothing more commanding than the telephone ringing in the middle of the night. We do know the insistant power of that voice in the dark. And some of us have been wakened on occasion by a sleepy youngster telling us about a frightening dream and, yes, voices, and, no, it didn't occur to us to invest much significance in the phenomena. Our response was limited to a rather mundane drink of water, comforting hug and tucking the dreamer back in bed....Which was what an old priest named Eli tried to do three times consecutively, in a story that is at least 3,000 years old.

It catches my imagination anytime I hear it, this marvelous tale about a young boy, just twelve or so, hearing a voice in the dark. When an old woman, Hanah, and her husband, Elkanah, conceived they were so deliriously happy they pledged the life of their unborn chold to God. An interesting literary and historic footnote is that

a young Galilean peasant girl remembered the story when she unexpectedly found herself pregnant. Mary recalled a lovely song Hanah had sung. It's in the ancient scripture text...

"My heart exults in the Lord,
My strength is exalted in the Lord.
I rejoice in my salvation.
The Lord raises up the poor from the dust.
He makes them sit with princes..."

which sounds like what Mary said under similar circumstances.

When Samuel was born his parents took him to the Sanctuary at Shiloh, in Southern Samaria, where the presiding priest was a man named Eli. That's when Samuel heard the voice, late at night, while he was sleeping near the altar. Three times the voice came, calling his name. Three times the boy did what anyone else in his right mind would do: he went to Eli, wakened him and said: "Yes, sir, what did you want." Three times old Eli told him to get a drink of water and go back to sleep. But the fourth time Eli, I've always hoped with a bit of impatience and annoyance, suggested that Samuel answer the voice, which he did, and the rest is history. Samuel went on to become Israel's first prophet. He annointed Saul to be the first King of Israel and later his successor.

There is a lot to learn by listening, by not talking. Learning is difficult, if not impossible, until I acknowledge that there is an empty spot in me which can only be filled by the knowledge that somebody else has. Learning is excrutiatingly painful until the student consents to listen.

W.H. Auden, described a scientist one time, as one who had "the habit of prayer, by which I mean the habit of listening." Auden went on to comment, "The petitionary aspect of prayer is its most trivial because it is involuntary. We cannot help asking that our wishes be granted, though all too many of them are like wishing that two and two make five, and cannot and should not be granted.....But the serious part of prayer begins when we have got our begging over with and listen for the voice of what I would call the Holy Spirit, though if others prefer to say the voice of Oz, or the dreamer, or conscience, I shouldn't quarrel."

(The Star Thrower, Loren Eiseley, Introduction, p. 20)

There is certainly, I find, a lot to be learned by listening to the world. I continue to be stimulated theologically by scientists who are willing to philosophize a bit about what they see and hear. Biologists, paleontologists, anthropologists, I find, approach the created order with the gentle reverence of a priest at the altar. Loren Eisely wrote a marvelous essay on "How Flowers Changed the World" which documented how the evolution of flowering plants, with their incredible ability to reproduce by way of flying, floating seeds, actually made human life possible. It was when the giant conifers with their cones dropping in place, gave way to colorful petal and spores that edible plants could feed migratory herds. And that availability of protein fed and nurtured the human race, Eisely suggests. He wrote: "These fantastic little seeds skipping and hopping about the woods and valleys brought with them an amazing adaptability. If our whole lives had not been spent in the midst of it, it would astound us." (The Star Thrower, p. 72)

If you listen to the world carefully you can hear the voice of the creator. But Christianity insists that the fullness of God may be perceived in Jesus Christ. Christianity maintains that the word God spoke was the life of this man. Back beyond that, it is basic to our religion that God's nature is to disclose himself, to let human beings in on the secret. The theological term for it is revelation.

God shows himself, God appears, God speaks out of the darkness because it is his nature to do so.

I propose that when we listen, really listen, to the world, to history, to other people, to the church, to Jesus, what we hear is God. No one ever thought about the experience more thoroughly than H. Richard Niebuhr. His book, The Meaning of Revelation is required reading for all divinity students. He wrote: "Revelation means the moment in our history through which we know ourselves to be known.....the moment we know ourselves to be judged by one who knows the final secrets of the heart....the moment we know ourselves valued. Revelation means the moment in which we are surprised by someone there in the darkness and void of human life."
(The Meaning of Revelation, p. 152)

God initiates the revelation of . himself, but if the Samuel story is accurate, we might not know it when it happens, unless we learn how to listen. And that, I submit, is no small assignment. Culturally, we are inclined in the opposite direction. Norman Cousins noted once that "our age is not likely to be distinguished in history for the large number of people who insisted on sitting still in order to pursue serious thought." "Silence," Cousins noted, was "not only the world's most critical shortage, it was almost a nasty word." Visitors from other cultures quickly notice our noisiness and our busyness, and the dirth of quiet times and places in which to listen for God if he had anything to say to us.

Our religion itself, reflecting the culture, is inclined to be noisy and busy. By definition it is either wrestling with theological dogma, or fighting the good fight for God's kingdom in the world. Both activities are, of course, vigorous, energy consuming. But what if true religion begins less actively, almost passively? What if authentic religion begins, not in wrestling, fighting, but in listening? Our brothers and sisters from the East can teach us Western Christians something we have forgotten, and that is that to hear God we must do some intentional listening.

In the next to last scene, St. Joan is being questioned by the Archbishop and King Charles. The Archbishop asks: "How do you know you are right?"

> Joan answers: "I always know My voices..."
> The King interrupts: "Oh, Your voices, Your voices. Why don't the voices come to me? I am king, not you."
> Joan responds: "They do come to you but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed from the heart and listened to the thrilling of the bells in the air after they stop ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do."

We could learn from that. Significantly, medical science wishes we would. Harvard Medical School professor Herbert Benson has written a book on coping with stress entitled, The Relaxation Response which among many other things recommends silent meditation, prayer, as a proven way to enhance one's respiratory and circulatory processes. Dr. Benson and others have proved that being quiet, listening, reflecting, is a very healthy exercise.

When God speaks it is not, please recall, crystal clear, unmistakable word from the Lord. That may be how it sounds when it is described later. Encounters with the divine are always clearer in retrospect. In the Samuel story, however, God's voice sounds like any other voice.

A friend of mine, John Mulder, recently moved from Princeton to assume the Presidency of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. In the opening convocation he shared with the student body the difficult and agonizing process of deciding to move. He said, very candidly, "the experience was frustrating, but it revealed to me again the curious and wonderful mystery of how God calls us. It is a rare call that resounds with clarion simplicity." The new Seminary President testified, that is, to the experience described in our text this morning. God's call is subtle, quiet, not terribly clear. We are free not to hear it, to ignore it, or, having heard, to disregard it. That's a consistent part of the Biblical witness too, by the way. Those who hear God's call aren't always overjoyed. In fact, more often than not they resist it.

The problem, is that when God calls us, it is not simply for our entertainment. It is to follow him. Auden comments earlier...the voice always asks for response.. obedience after painful change. It is not to play out a clear role with all the surprises and risks expurgated. Not at all. What God calls us to is a pilgrimage: a whole life-time of following him: an exciting adventure of living each new day, each new experience as his children. There is adventure in that. There is demand and discipline, the risk of failure, tragedy, defeat, and the possibility of victory, accomplishment, satisfaction.

What God promises those who hear his voice, those willing to respond, is that he will give strength for the journey. He will empower his people. He will give you the resources you need to follow faithfully. You can count on it. You will not be abandoned. So it was, hundreds of years after Samuel, when Jesus called Simon, and Andrew, James and John to follow him. And so it is today when he calls you and me to follow faithfully in our own lives.

First, of course, before all else, we must learn again that the essence of this faith is listening. The good news is that in Jesus Christ God has spoken and that he continues to speak. But he speaks quietly, discreetly, personally, and if we hope to hear....we must listen very carefully. AMEN.

God eternal, we confess that we are more comfortable with noise than with silence; that we prefer activity to solitude. Give us strength to overcome that. Give us grace to wait and watch and listen. Give us courage to respond with obedient, faithful lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.